

I wrote my first zine in the golden age of my childhood--golden, not gilded--when I was 5 or 6.

THE CONGRESS BUILDING

My father owned a bookstore in Portland, Maine, The Paperback Trader.

He put my stapled together construction paper creation in the front window and sealed my identity--writer.

The Pike  
Bookstore



Or maybe my identity was already sealed, engraved on my psyche. To this day, I feel safest and happiest in a room full of books. But I did think that by now, I'd be the author of some of them.

I got a lot of attention for my writing, early on. In third grade, I wrote a poem called, “I Wonder”; my teacher loved it so much that she sent me on a reading tour of the school’s classrooms. My brother drew an illustration for it in his college art class, and both still hang on my mom’s wall. I was a little surprised at the popularity of that poem. I thought it was a little cliché—was this my inner critic or my pretentious inner snob? It’s hard to say. I wrote plays to be performed by my classmates—I still remember rehearsing in the hall. I wrote at home, too. My favorite thing was a fresh notebook.






I won awards for "Excellence in English Composition."

I won second place in a national contest in 7th grade and more awards in high school, but outside of school, I wouldn't enter contests for kids. I wanted to be the best out of everyone or nothing at all. I deeply regretted this later when I realized how crammed full of good writers the world really is and that all I had done was miss out on great experiences and opportunities. Pride had a high cost for my writing, not for the last time.

One day, a classmate told me that a teacher had told kids in detention that "despite my reputation", my writing was riddled with spelling and grammar mistakes.

I was just happy to hear that I had enough of a reputation for a teacher, one of my favorites, to be talking about my writing.





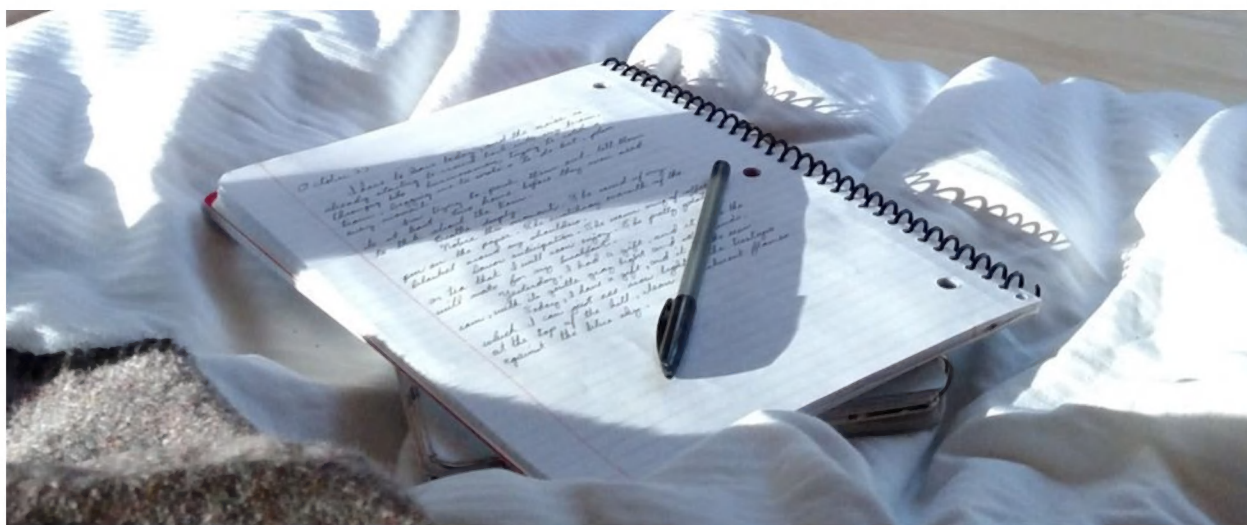
"Don't stop writing," my teachers told me as I prepared to graduate.

But I quickly learned that I hadn't been a big fish in a little pool.

I was the only fish in a pool that nobody else really cared to be in.

I started submitting to various publications when I was about 12, learning a whole new language: mss, SASE, first North American rights. I learned that a big fat Writer's Guide full of promising addresses is no good at all if it's last year's edition. I received my first rejection letters and quickly learned, to my lasting embarrassments, which "contests" would happily print my poems if my parents bought a \$50 poetry anthology from them.





Although I never stopped writing, I didn't study a particularly relevant field in college, choosing instead a more practical teaching degree. The degree has served me well and I would probably do the same if I had to decide again, but there are times that I regret that decision nonetheless.

What opportunities might I have had?

Would I have been able to skip some of this trial and error?



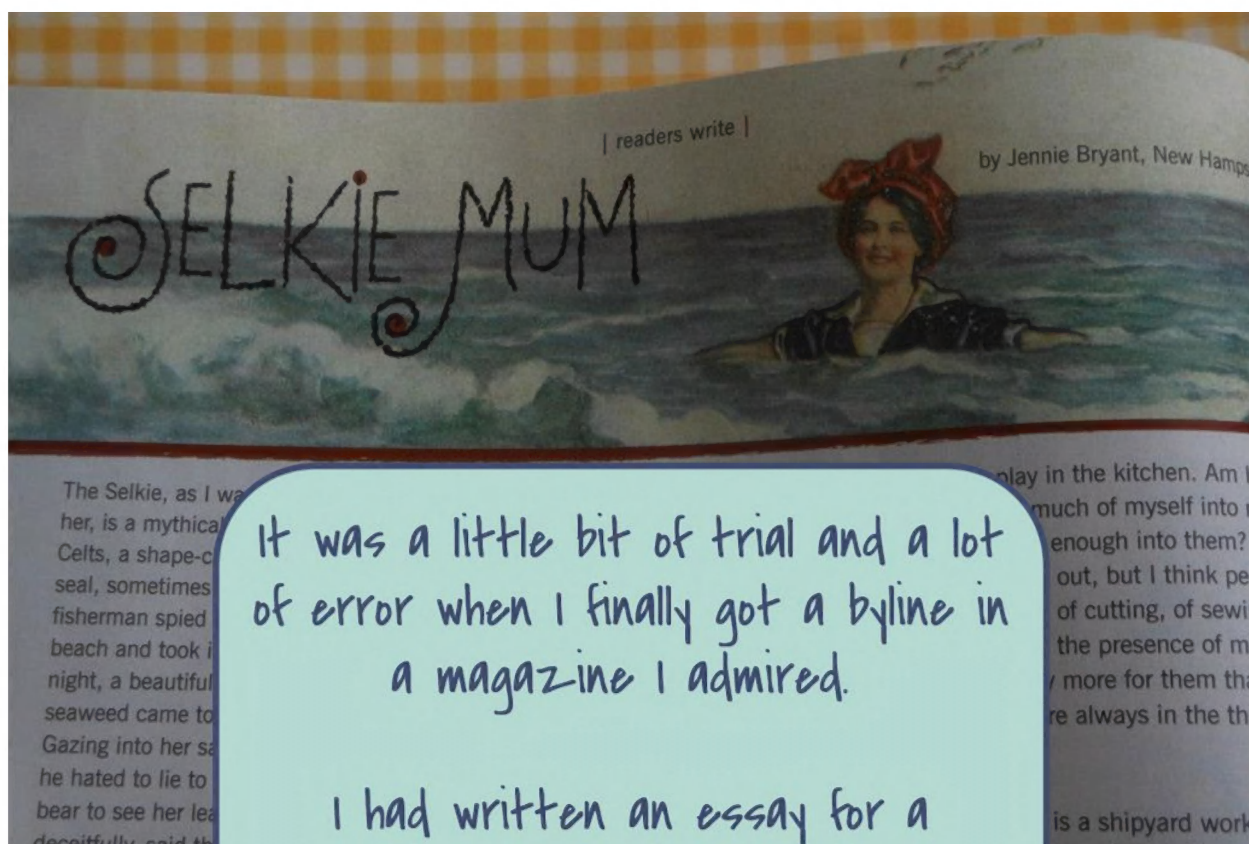
I continued to do the only things I knew to do, without a network or any expert guidance: writing, reading, reading about writing, attending writer's conferences, submitting, getting rejected.

Every New Year's Day, I resolved, "This is the year I will get published!"

Some years, there were modest successes that paid even more modestly. One year when I had made \$200, I went to a writer's conference and was shocked to learn that this was more than many of the other writers there.

Oh my. That was a rude awakening.



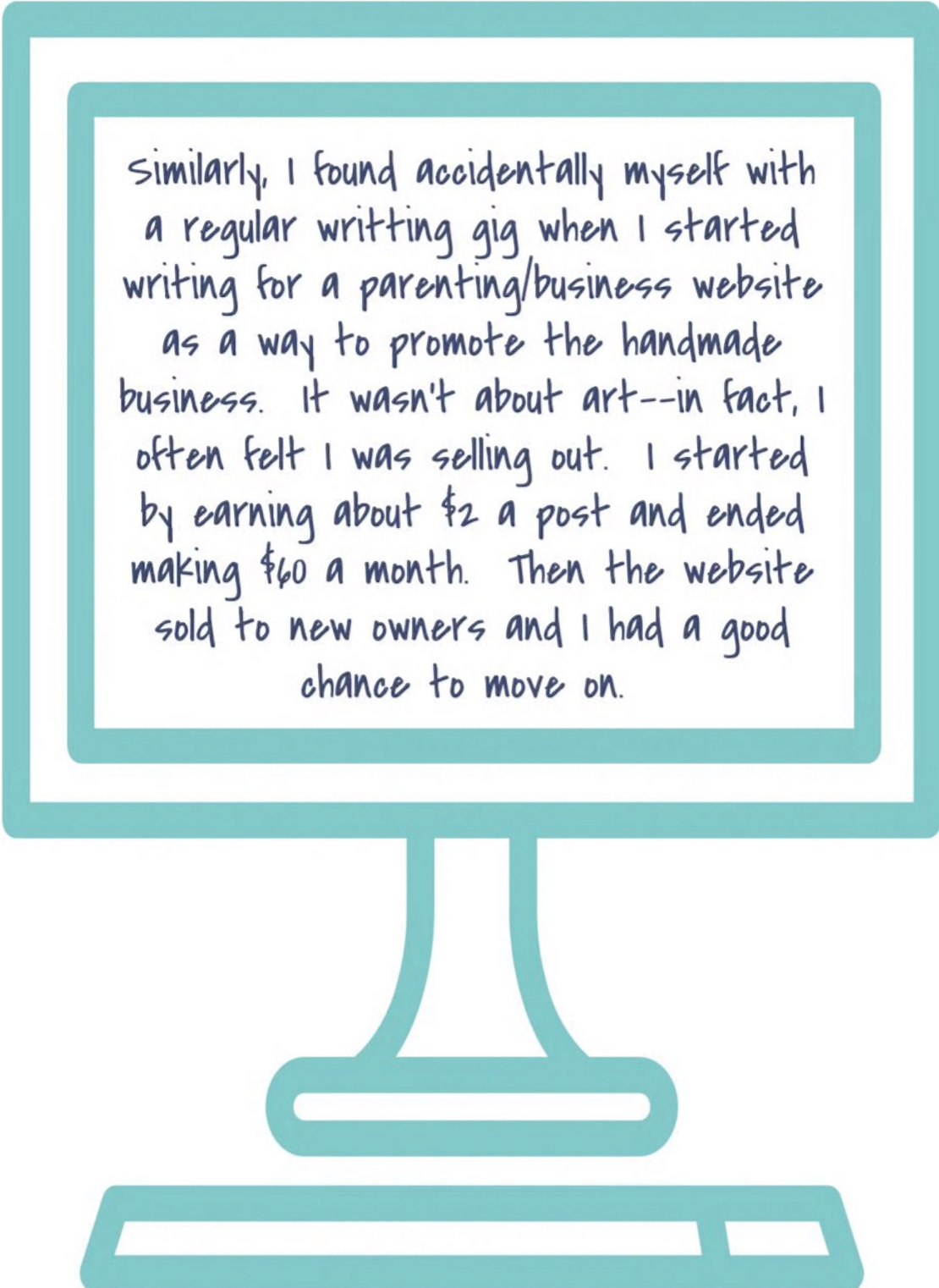


It was a little bit of trial and a lot of error when I finally got a byline in a magazine I admired.

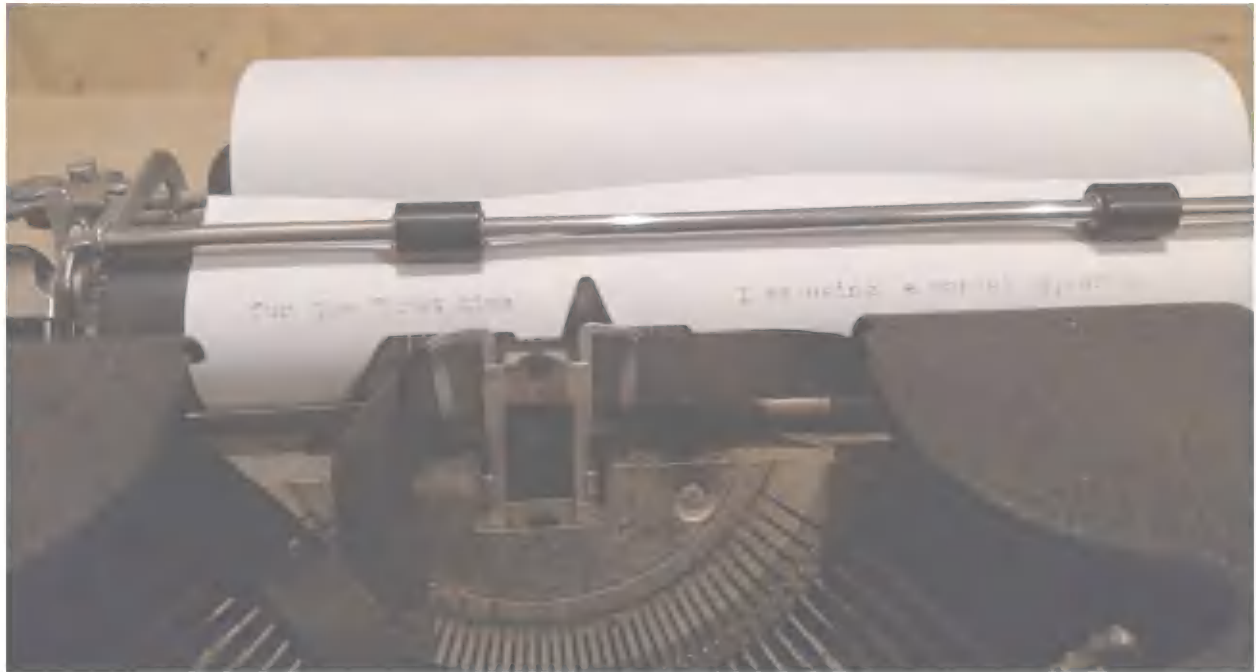
I had written an essay for a contest about my little sewing business--a totally unplanned side hustle-- only to find out that my entry was meant to be 1500 characters, not 1500 words.

Not wanting to waste the effort I'd put into writing it, I casually sent it to a magazine without any particular expectations. I'd had no pretensions to literature when I'd written it.

They accepted it



Similarly, I found accidentally myself with a regular writing gig when I started writing for a parenting/business website as a way to promote the handmade business. It wasn't about art--in fact, I often felt I was selling out. I started by earning about \$2 a post and ended making \$60 a month. Then the website sold to new owners and I had a good chance to move on.



Even though writing for the website had hardly been a dream opportunity, it ended up being important for my writing life. I stopped thinking, "Someday I'm going to be a writer" and started saying, out loud, to actual people, sometimes even strangers, "I am a writer."

Why not?

I'd always been producing writing.

Now, I'd had things published.

I was getting paid.

By what standard did I not deserve the title "writer"?



Nonetheless, it felt big and bold.

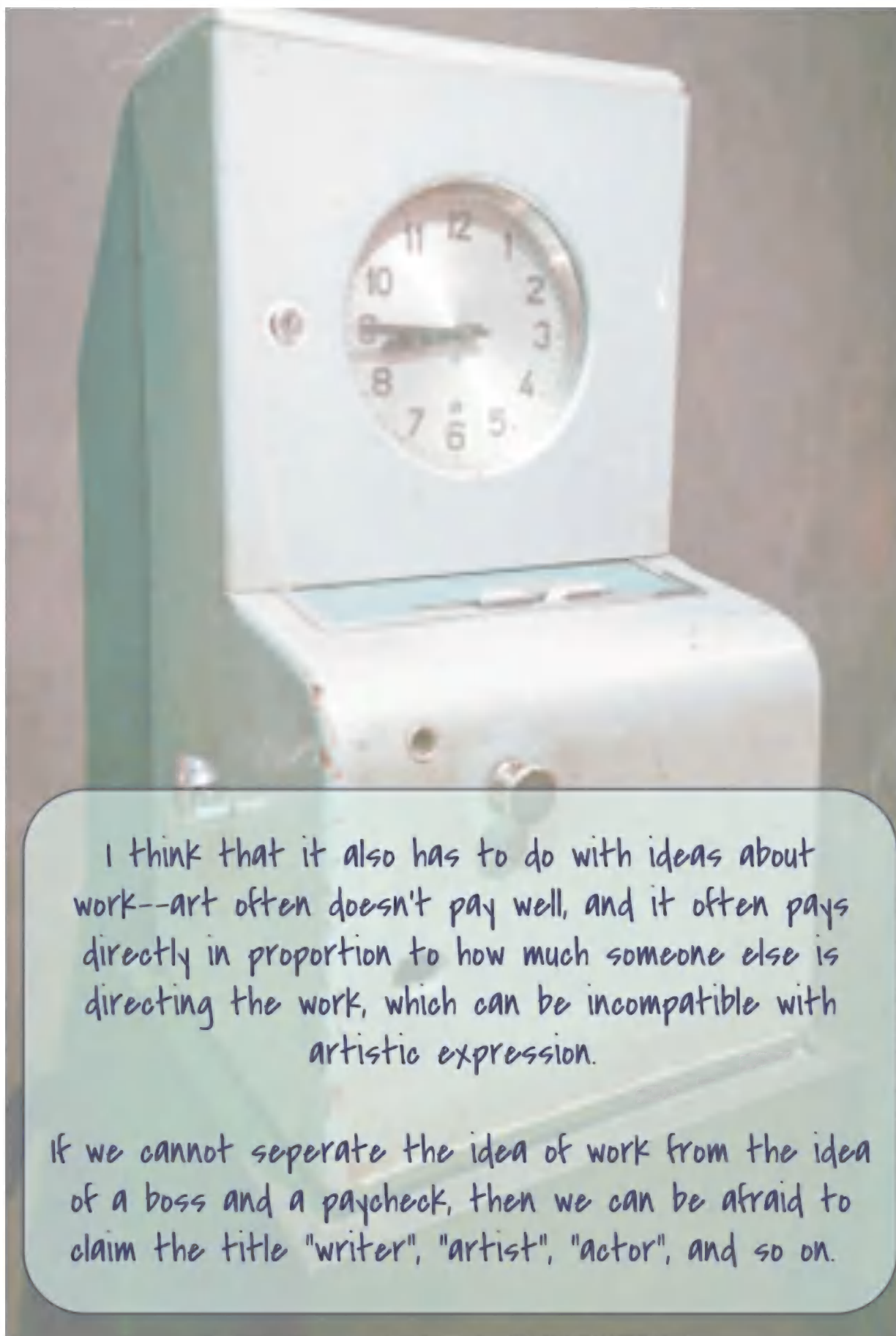
One day, I overheard a man in a bookstore tell an employee sheepishly that he was a writer, "...well, trying to be one." I wanted to rush out and reassure him, "You write! You're a writer!"

Why is it so hard?

There is a mystique tied to writing, perhaps to art in general, that makes it hard to tie it to yourself. Maybe this is the whiff of immortality in art, that a piece of yourself might outlast your mortal body. Maybe it's something more prosaic: the fewer people are willing to call themselves writers, the more mysterious it seems to be one. But whatever the cause of this mystique, you know your self and your own humanity too well to claim the title for yourself.

It's hard to put on deodorant and think, "I'm a unicorn!"





I think that it also has to do with ideas about work--art often doesn't pay well, and it often pays directly in proportion to how much someone else is directing the work, which can be incompatible with artistic expression.

If we cannot separate the idea of work from the idea of a boss and a paycheck, then we can be afraid to claim the title "writer", "artist", "actor", and so on.

My definition of success has always been fairly fluid. Sometimes, it is finishing the novel. Sometimes, it is getting paid and published. Sometimes, it is actually liking the work I've been paid to generate. Sometimes, it is finding a gig that pays enough to be helpful to my family and ease the earning burden on my husband (who is a champ in supporting my writing.)

Always, I have aspired to write books and short pieces rich enough for literary analysis but readable enough for anyone to enjoy--a tall order.



I'm still trying to reach that summit.



Although large scale commercial success wasn't necessarily an interest of mine (in fact, I was a little dubious of it), I did dream of a letter of acceptance from a traditional publisher, a traditional book in my hands, a traditional paycheck in the bank.

But then I began to wonder where this definition of success, this dream, this goal, came from.

I kept returning to one thought, a memory really.

There was a woman I knew of who often shared her poetry with many mutual acquaintances.

I didn't admire her poetry--I was, in fact, an insufferable snob about it, although I wouldn't have said so out loud, of course. I'm struggling to even share that here, but it's important to the lesson I learned.

But I couldn't help noticing that her poetry MEANT something to people, apparently.

They weren't looking for a complex meter or literary devices.

They were looking for a word of comfort in a hard, scary world.

Wasn't that more important than any of my lofty goals?

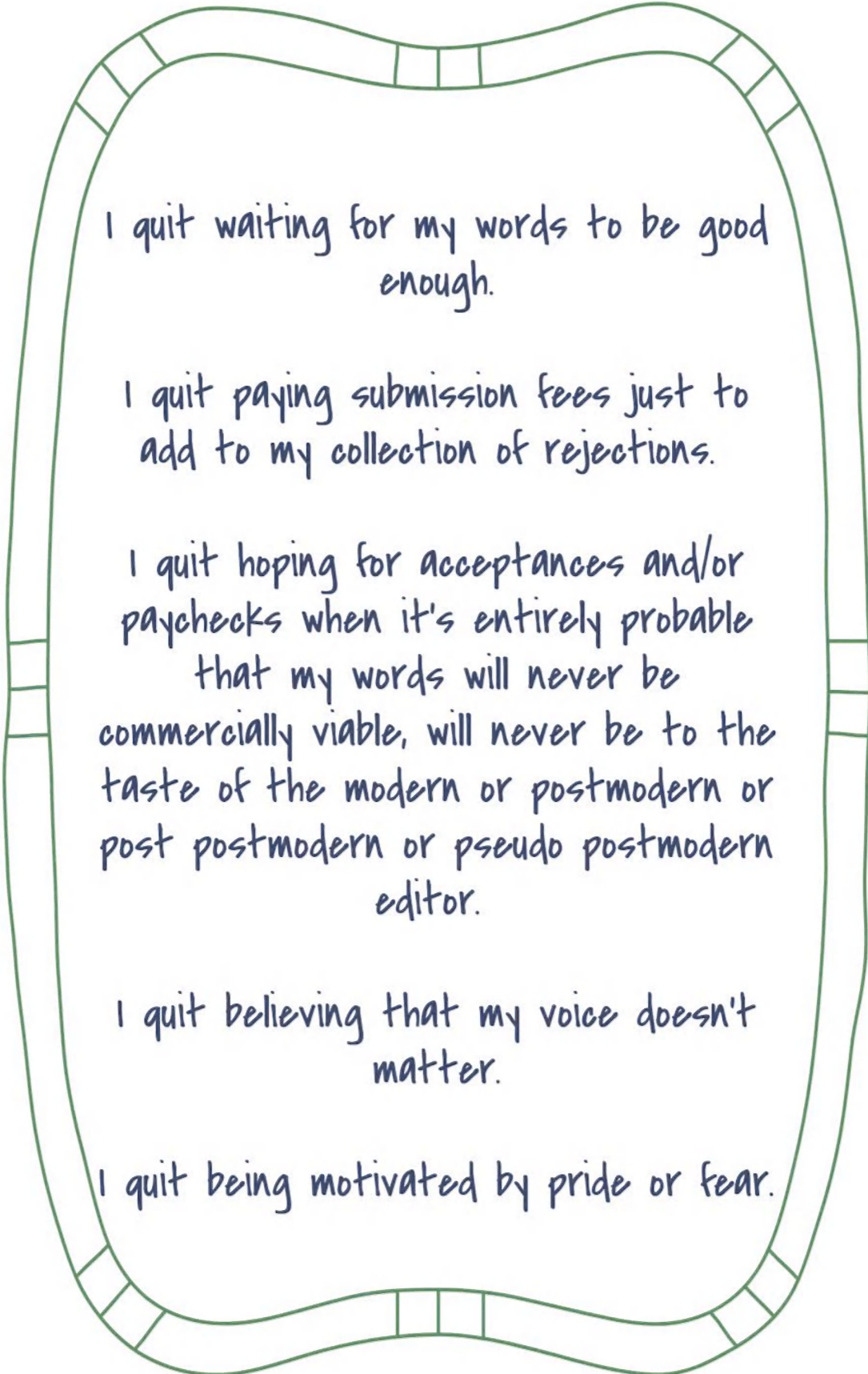
I used to share my poetry more freely  
but always, always from pride; always  
because people had made a big deal  
about me and my writing.

Later, I kept it hidden for the same  
reason--pride--waiting for it to ripen  
to perfection in a Word document, for  
the rich layers of meaning and  
abstract metaphor and enigmatic  
allusion to get woven in, waiting it to  
meet the standards of a publisher who  
met MY standards.



I quit.





I quit waiting for my words to be good enough.

I quit paying submission fees just to add to my collection of rejections.

I quit hoping for acceptances and/or paychecks when it's entirely probable that my words will never be commercially viable, will never be to the taste of the modern or postmodern or post postmodern or pseudo postmodern editor.

I quit believing that my voice doesn't matter.

I quit being motivated by pride or fear.



And I begin.

I am six years old again, with scissors and glue  
and markers and ideas and people who believe  
in me.



Thank you for reading my first zine.